MORE ABOUT "SEVENTEEN"

RUTH GORDON
In "SEVENTEEN"

By STUART WALKER.

BEFORE "Seventeen" was produced almost every one—even Booth Tarkington himself—insisted that it wasn't the kind of material that plays are usually made of. And now that "Seventeen" has proved itself a play—which means, of course, a "successful" play—I have been asked what kind of play it is. It doesn't seem to fit absolutely into any of the usual dramatic categories—farce, sentimental drama, or such like. Yet when tested by all the college rules for playwrights it seems 100 per cent. correct. It has action, suspense, climax, characterization, denouement—every text book requirement. It is built according to Prof. Baker, for there is nothing in the play that does not grow out of what precedes it, not a line or situation put in for itself alone.

Admitted, then, that it is a play—what kind is it?

I have tried to work out a short definition by calling it a "psychological comedy of manners," a formidable term, surely, to apply to delicate, springlike "Seventeen." But while "comedy of manners" is usually used of a play concerned with drawing rooms and well bred people, in its strictest sense it can include the faithful reflection of the customs and manners of young people who live in suburban and semi-rural United States, the locale of "Seventeen." And "Seventeen" is furthermore a psychological analysis of youth personified by *Willie Baxter*.

I may say that "Seventeen" is the most exhaustive study of adolescence that I know of in dramatic literature. Frank Wedekind's "Spring's Awakening" is a study of abnormal adolescence and therefore much more limited in its fidelity to life and in its appeal. But "Seventeen," which deals with normal boys and girls, is the story of the youth of all of us.

Of course there would never have been any play but for the book "Seventeen," and when Mr. Tarkington says that the play is not his he means the dramatization. For his is the deep psychological analysis of adolescence; his the deliciously humorous "angle" of the narrative. His the genius to search the mysterious heart of universal seventeen and lay it bare with tender raillery. And it was the broadness and depth of his work that seemed to set it almost beyond the limits of the theatre.

For most people conceive a drama as a thread—or shall I say a tune. The tune goes up and down the scale, and finally in the last act ends on a high merry note, if the play be a comedy, or on a low mournful note, if a tragedy. This conception is so generally accepted by our playwrights that almost all our modern drama is written under its influence. They try to cast realism in a theatrical mould; their characters may be human, but they turn them into puppets by requiring them all to dance to the tune of a theatrical plot. And the result is—well, the result is nine out of ten plays we see on Broadway. It is a play which may number many laughs or effective situations, but has not any "sum total," or general application. And it is only when you connect somehow with your audience's personal experience that you give it more than transient entertainment.

"Seventeen" the book had such tremendous "sum total" that it seemed to me it couldn't be entirely lost in a play. And in making the production the watchword was "Be true to the book." Now, "in a true play only the true things are funny"—I am quoting a remark of Mr. Tarkington's because he stated so accurately what I had always felt instinctively but never phrased. And therefore the greatest care was used in the adaptation and in adding the new material necessary to some scenes to keep absolutely in the spirit of the book. Although the laughter in "Seventeen" is almost continuous—by actual count the laughs equal in number many a vaunted Broadway farce—yet not a single line or piece of business has been injected simply for comedy. Nor does any actor step out of his legitimate characterization to secure a laugh or to create a striking situation.

As I have said, a certain amount of material had to be added to the incidents in the book which had been selected as the main threads of the play story. And please note that I say "threads" of the plot, for "Seventeen" has more than one. It is not a drama of a single tune, it is an orchestration. The old story is told, not in a series of notes but in a series of

EVELYN CAVANAUGH
In "THE ZIEGFELD FROLIC

chords. No, that isn't another way of saying plot and sub-plot. It becomes clearer when I say that the chords are not random chords.

Just as in a symphony, "Seventeen" is built on several definite themes or motifs. There is the motif of the dress suit:

Act I.—Willie wants a dress suit.
Act II.—Willie gets a dress suit.
Act III.—Willie loses the dress suit.
Act IV.—Willie acts upon knowledge gained through the dress suit experience.

Side by side with the "dress suit" motif runs the Lola Pratt love theme.

Act I.—Willie has stated indifference to all girls; he meets and is dazzled by Lola.

Act II.—Willie's romantic first love blinds him into thinking Lola a flawless angel.

Act III.—Willie is staggered that Lola can tolerate as an admirer the "big lummox" George Crooper.

Act IV.—Willie realizes that Lola is a thoughtless flirt; whereas he gave her his boyish love, she wanted admiration for her vanity's sake.

And now, booming grandly beneath both these themes—the "dress suit" and the "love" themes—there is the adolescent or "Seventeen" motif. This is the broad human theme composed, as is man himself, of laughter and of tears. For three acts and a half this theme is emphasized on its humorous phase—the boy in Willie contrasted suddenly with his idea of what it means to be a man. Bergson has convinced us, hasn't he, that comedy is a matter of unexpected contrasts?

But at the end of the fourth act the emphasis in the adolescence motif is transferred boldly to the man-Willie phase. In modern music such a shift is called transferring the dynamic climax to a different key, and is considered a piece of daring. With a producer it is a piece of daring too, and I have been told that four out of five producers would have cut out the final scene in the last act. They might have put it back in rehearsal, but they would have cut it out in the reading.

With most plays they would have been right. But "Seventeen" is unusual material and permits unusual treatment. And to have ended the play on a comedy note would not have been to live up to the depth of Mr. Tarkington's study of the growing up of *Willie*. For *Willie*, self-centred, sensitive, desperately proud and romantic, *Willie* is a man. And the last scene shows him thus—disillusioned of his infatuation for *Lola*, and acquiring instead a broader tenderness and understanding of love. A proud, sensitive boy who is brave enough to show his emotions to his mother and to express his feeling for her, is a man.

But, some may object, how can a scene not in the book be true to the book?

I can best answer this by showing how a scene or incident in the book, if presented to the stage, would have been quite false to the spirit of the book. I refer to the incident of *George Crooper* and the cigarettes. As described by Mr. Tarkington, it is deliciously funny—he doesn't use many words, but they are the kind Flaubert called the "inevitable" ones. The undoing of *George Crooper* by "Little Sweetheart" cigarettes is as perfect a piece of vengeance as any in Greek tragedy. Why then leave it out of the play?

Because the stage presentation would have made it necessary to represent exactly and in detail what Mr. Tarkington has so delightfully suggested to the imagination. And whereas nausea is one of "nature's magnificent jokes on mankind," to reject nothing but living the play. And that is why they stand and applaud and applaud after the final curtain. We always have six or seven curtain calls at the end of the last act and theatre wiseacres can't understand why. It is because people have not been merely entertained or amused for a couple of hours. They have been hearing again the symphony of their own youth, and when the magic music ceases they try, oh, tremendously, to bring it back again.

HIP NOW LEADS.

Charles Dillingham's gorgeous pageant of a thousand delights, "Cheer Up!" at the Hippodrome, which none can afford to miss and all can afford to see, will have the distinction this coming week of leading all other amusement successes in New York in number of performances and length of run. With the long engagement of "Oh Boy" coming to an end last week after being presented 478 times, "Cheer Up!" leads the way with a record to date of 387 capacity performances. New features are added weekly, and beginning Monday Easter novelties will be in order. Belle Story and the three hundred girls who surround her will be clothed in new spring finery, and a new musical number by Lieut. John Philip Sousa and Raymond Hubbell will be introduced with the accustomed lavishness by R. H. Burnside.

THE NEW BOY.

Saxon Kling Is a Popular Stranger.

Saxon Kling, who plays the part of the lovable young scamp, *Frank Gardner*, in "Mrs. Warren's Profession" at the Comedy Theatre, is temporarily a Washington Square Player. Mr. Kling, young, blond and handsome, was born in Paulding, Ohio, but has never seen his birthplace because, he explains, his father was visiting Paulding on business; his mother accompanied him, and it so happened that he was born there. Before he was three weeks old he returned to his home town, Marion, Ohio, where in the due course of events he attended school and high school. His childhood was uneventful except for one incident. He always teased to be taken to the theatre, and whenever he was sufficiently good his mother took him to see some of the plays that were shown in Marion.

When he was old enough he became a freshman at Columbus University. Toward the end of his first year in college, however, he decided to come to New York to study art, but instead (even now Mr. Kling can hardly explain how it happened) he found himself playing the role of *Richard Hare* in "East Lynne." "It's the best part I ever did!" he declares to-day, many (at least five) years afterward, with unabated enthusiasm.

"After playing in 'East Lynne' with considerable artistic and more or less questionable financial success," he continued, "we were stranded in Auburn, N. Y. I had to telegraph home for money; my mother wired back saying he would send me a money order if I would promise to return to school. I couldn't do anything else under the circumstances, could I?

"But when vacation time came around I joined the chorus of 'Oh! Oh! Delphine.' After that I went into vaudeville in a sketch by May Tully; then followed the part of the dope fiend in 'The Fight'; that summer I joined Henry Miller's company on the coast, playing among other things the gypsy in Galsworthy's 'Bit of Love.'

"When I went home on my vacation that year my mother remonstrated with me and wanted to know why I had forsaken the palette for the footlights. My Grandmother Kling was a Boston Shaker, and a deep rooted family prejudice against earning one's living in the theatre colored my mother's views. In time she became reconciled to my chosen calling, but my grandmother has never forgiven me.

"I tried to explain to my mother that it was because I always felt sure of myself on the stage, but that I did not always feel sure of myself with a paint brush in my hand. She was not entirely convinced, but she compromised by saying that if I must be an actor I had better acquire the necessary training for a good one. So I joined the American Academy of Dramatics, graduating in the same class with Olive Tell and Phœbe Foster.

"My first engagement after coming out, as it were, a full fledged actor, was on tour with 'The Show Shop'; then in Augustus Thomas's 'Rio Grande'; next another plunge into vaudeville in 'Enter a Stranger.'

"Then occurred the supreme tragedy of my life. I rehearsed the role of *Arthur* in 'Pendennis' for three weeks, working up the wildest sort of enthusiasm for it; then I was told I was too young for the part; it nearly broke my heart. Brandon Tynan played it.

"I played with Ruth Chatterton in 'Come Out of the Kitchen' "